

## Gradable and non-gradable adjectives 2

A

Some adjectives have both gradable and non-gradable senses.

(i) Some adjectives have different senses when they are gradable and non-gradable. Compare:

- Smith is a **very common** name. (= frequently found; gradable) *and*
- We have a lot of **common** interests. (= shared; non-gradable; not *very*)
- The house is **very old**. (= existed many years; gradable) *and*
- I met my **old** politics professor the other day. (= former; non-gradable; not *very*)

**Also: civil, clean, critical, electric** (= 'exciting' when gradable),  
**empty, false, late, odd, original, particular, straight**

(ii) Some adjectives have similar meanings when they are gradable and non-gradable. However, when they are gradable we talk about the quality that a person or thing has (i.e. they are *qualitative* adjectives and therefore can be used with an adverb), and when they are non-gradable we talk about the category or type they belong to (i.e. they are *classifying* adjectives). Compare:

- I don't know where he came from, but he sounded **slightly foreign**. (= not from this country; gradable) *and*
- She is now advising on the government's **foreign** policy. (= concerning other countries; non-gradable)
- They had a **very public** argument. (= seen / heard by a lot of people; gradable) *and*
- He was forced to resign by **public** pressure. (= from many people in the community; non-gradable)

**Also: academic, adult, average, diplomatic, genuine, guilty, human, individual, innocent, mobile, private, professional, scientific, technical, true, wild**

B

In spoken English in particular, we can use **good and ...**, **lovely and ...**, and **nice and ...** followed by another gradable adjective in order to emphasise the second adjective. Possible patterns include –

- ☆ **good and ready** and more colloquially **good and proper / relaxed / strong** (*but not usually good and beautiful / rich / tall*):
  - If you're all feeling **good and relaxed** after the break, let's get on with the meeting.
- ☆ **lovely and dry / soft / sunny / warm** (*but not usually lovely and decent / empty / short*):
  - It's **lovely and warm** in here. Freezing outside, though.
- ☆ **nice and bright / clean / cold / comfortable / early / fresh / quiet / simple / soft / tidy / warm** (*but not usually nice and interesting / handsome / exciting*):
  - 'Shall we get some strawberries?' 'Yes, they look **nice and fresh**.'

We can also link comparative adjectives (see Unit 72) with **and** to talk about an increasing degree of the quality described in the adjective. We use **more and more + adjective** in a similar way:

- As she got **more and more excited**, her voice got **higher and higher and louder and louder**.
- The taxi driver just drove **faster and faster and faster** until I told him to stop, and I got out.



## Exercises

68.1 Complete the sentences using each of the adjectives from the box twice, once with a gradable sense (adding *very*) and once with a non-gradable sense. (Use a dictionary if necessary.) **A1**

critical false late original straight

- 1 The novel was praised by the judges for its *very original* use of language.
- 2 The train is ..... again. I wonder if the bad weather has delayed it.
- 3 The report was ..... of the police officers involved in the investigation.
- 4 I had a / an ..... choice between working for my father and having no job at all.
- 5 She was accused of giving ..... information during the trial.
- 6 The driver of the overturned lorry was in a / an ..... condition in hospital last night.
- 7 I was given the oil painting by my ..... uncle Simon.
- 8 The ..... fireplaces had been removed and replaced by more modern ones.
- 9 The path to the summit of the hill was ..... and steep.
- 10 Many of the people I met were quite sincere, but some seemed ....., so that I could never be sure if they meant what they said.

68.2 Complete each pair of sentences using the adverb + adjective pairs from the box. Use the adjective in both sentences, but include the adverb in only one. **A1+**

(largely) academic    ~~(fairly) average~~    (extremely) diplomatic  
(very) human    (intensely) private    (highly) technical

- 1 a The *average* temperature on the island is a pleasant 23.4 °C.  
b Breckton is a / an *fairly average* town in the south of England.
- 2 a The instructions were ..... and clearly meant for an expert.  
b Fiona got a job providing ..... support for people having computer problems.
- 3 a Being frightened in this situation is a ..... response and nothing to be ashamed of.  
b Near the top of the mountain there were signs of ..... habitation, perhaps centuries old.
- 4 a I found it difficult to understand the ..... talk that Professor Downs gave.  
b The ..... standards at the school are very high.
- 5 a He worked hard to afford a ..... education for his three children.  
b She was a / an ..... person and had few close friends.
- 6 a After Mara left university she worked in the ..... service for a number of years.  
b When he was asked to comment on the French President's decision he gave a / an ..... answer, not wanting to appear critical.

68.3 Complete the sentences with phrases beginning with *good / lovely / nice + and + an appropriate adjective*. **B**

- 1 Now that the room is painted yellow, it looks *lovely and bright*.
- 2 I've put you in the spare room at the back of the house, so it'll be .....
- 3 A: Have you felt the material my new coat's made of?    B: Oh, it's .....
- 4 The oranges looked quite old, but when I cut into them they were .....
- 5 There's no point in trying to persuade Gustavo. He won't make up his mind until he's .....